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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a writing assignment given in an introductory literature class at an open-admissions university. In what can be called "the paper of many parts," students write six short pieces in which they do different things with a poem. The paper begins and ends with response statements: an initial one and one at the end that extends or reflects upon the first response. Sandwiched between these are paraphrase, parody, report, and interview. The assignment gets students to live with a text for a while, reading and re-reading it, then reflecting on the experience. While the parody and the interview often produce good results from students, the report is the least successful part. Students often copy from an encyclopedia, so they must bring their source to class and re-work it. If the purpose of having students write about literature is to help students become better readers, the best writing assignments are those closely connected to the text. Teachers should shift some of their focus from analysis and argument to description. Furthermore, teachers should place less value on organization, which removes the student several steps from the reading experience. The result of the assignment is a set of papers that the instructor can actually enjoy reading. (A sample assignment is attached.) (SG)

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Writing about Literature: The Paper of Many Parts

Daniel Sheridan

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Writing about Literature: The Paper of Many Parts

Daniel Sheridan

I'd like to tell you about a writing assignment. It's one I give in introductory lit classes at an open-admissions university. Students form aroudnt he campus like to choose courses like "Intro to Fiction" or "Intro to Poetry" are popular choices for meeting general ed requirements. So I'm speaking here of lit courses, with 35 to 40 stduents, mostly freshmen, few of them English majors. Thirteenth graders in a required course.

For years I've struggled with the problem of writing in these courses. What sorts of things should students be writing as they study literature? And I continue to ask that question and it's why I'm here this afternoon. For while few of us would question the value of writing about literature, we want to know more about it. We know that readign and writing are mutually re-inforcing activities, yet it's not adequate to say students should "just write" or "write anything." For my own part, I have wanted to know more precisely what kinds of assignments are most helpful to my students.

Early on in my teaching, I solved part of the problem when I took to assigning reading journals. At that time I knew next to nothing about reader-response theory, but instinct was pointing me in that direction, and the results were gratifying--up to a point. I found, as many of you have probably discovered, that students do indeed have things to

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say about the books they read and they can write pretty well in short bursts, provided they get some direction.

Later, I became familiar with new theories of reading and re-read Literature as Exploration and the more recent work of Louise Rosenblatt. This led to changes: much more attention to the way students were actually reading the works, and a lot more reading and responding in the classroom. The response statements students wrote in class fed back into their journals, which improved accordingly. But the papers students wrote--that is, the essays as opposed to journals or brief statements-- were still pretty bad. These had none of the energy and insight that students showed in their journals.

The blame, of course, belonged to the students. These dummies just couldn't do what I asked. But, of course, it also belonged to the teacher. Some dummy was setting them up for failure. Upon reflection I could see that most of my assignments were fairly standard thesis-support essays. They had to analyze a text, they had to compare and contrast it to another text, they had to argue for or against a particular reading of the text. This was the sort of paper I had written in high school and college and graduate school. It seemed natural that my students should write the same kind of thing.

I can see now then inconsistency in my teaching. I had adopted, or so I said, a response-centered approach to literature, but when it came to the writing in the course I

reverted to something else--the traditionalist who wanted an explication of the text. Moreover, I seemed unable to learn from my own work in composition classes. There, in the freshman comp courses, I had long ago discovered that the standard research paper assignments was a disaster. Ask anybody to do original research on a controversial subject and then argue a case for or against a thesis derived from that research, while carefully documenting the sources--ask that, and you're asking too much. My students couldn't do any of those things very well, much less all of them at once. So I learned to divide the task to allow for success. To this day my comp students never write big research papers on controversial topics; they write little things, often in a series, so they could learn how to do them.

Making that kind of transfer--from one course to another or even from one aspect of a course to another--is difficult. Or at least it is for me. Eventually, however, it occurred to me that in a reader-response classroom, the proper subject of writing is the experience of reading itself. Having realized that, I could see that the paper had to be shaped differently. Instead of an analysis or argument based on a single, coherent reading of the text, what I wanted was something like a process or even a narrative. From the student's point of view, it would turn out to be the story of how he or she read the work.

Only then was I able to make the connection to my comp teaching. Divide and conquer. I didn't really want an

academic "paper" at all. I wanted a series of things for students to do with a work of literature. I wanted the sort of thing that I eventually came to call "the paper of many parts."

* * *

At the end of this paper you will find one such assignment. I gave it last year in an Intro to Poetry class. In that course students did a lot of in-class writing, kept a journal, and wrote quite a bit of poetry. This is the most formal piece of writing they did.

It is, of course, a college assignment: a secondary teacher would pose it in a different way. But I hope the basic thrust of the assignment is clear. Students are asked to write six short pieces in which they do different things with the poem. These do not have to fit together into a coherent essay; no transitions are needed and, to underscore that point, I ask that each part begin on a new page.

But while it looks shapeless, there is in fact some structure here. The paper begins and ends with response statements, an initial one and, at the end, one that extends or reflects upon the first response. We have written many such statements in class, so students have a general idea of what to do. Sandwiched between these statements are some familiar ways of manipulating the text--the paraphrase and parody--and two sections which ask students to use outside sources--the report and the interview.

What attracts me about to this assignment--aside from the fact that it produces good, readable papers--is the way it gets students to live with a text for a while, reading and re-reading it, and then reflecting on the experience. That, as you know, doesn't come naturally. Students want to read a poem once, come with an "idea," and then write the paper in order to be done with it. I want them to do something quite different: read and re-read, puzzle over problems, learn something new, approach the poem in a variety of ways.

So the assignment calls for time: up to a month in my course, but maybe a week in a high school class. They must handle, or man-handle, the poem in different ways, treating it as a personal experience, as a thing to be reported on, as a topic of conversation, as an object of ridicule. They must read it, re-write it, listen to it, talk about it. Do they get sick of it? Yes, some do, but more often they say that they enjoy the process. I think what they like best is that they don't have to <u>prove</u> anything.

The results are genuinely interesting. In fact, I continue to be surprised how even the dullest student manages to teach me somethign about the poem.

The parodies (see the samples at the end) are my favorite part. At first some students resist doing this, especially if they are deeply committed to a serious poem. One refused to write a parody of her favorite poem, "Because I Could Not Stop for Death"--until I made her laugh with an

anthologized piece in which the hearse is tranformed into a garbage truck. She wound up writing a very funny poem. Of course students need models--I use the work of professional poets and students of previous classes. But once I refer them to familiar parodies--a spoof in Mad Magazine, for example, or a song by Weird Al--they get the point pretty quickly.

I also love the interviews. Best of all is the way this assignment puts them in a social situation: students must convince someone to read a poem and then talk about it. The results can be hilarious. "My girlfriend couldn't make sense of this poem." "My dad thought it was dirty." "My roommate in Computer Science couldn't believe people waste their time on this sort of thing." Ideally, the interview comes late in the process, so students have some understanding of the work and therefore some investment in it. Sometimes they argue with the interviewee; sometimes they agree; but they always learn something.

On the other hand, the least successful part is the report. Here we run into the problem of copying from an encyclopedia or biographical dictionary. I try to make it clear that they have many options, that they do not have to resort to the life of the poet, but the quick fix is too tempting for many. Perhaps I should drop this section--but, then, I don't want the paper to become overly subjective; and, besides, I believe in the value of historical or

biographical information: it really can make a difference in the way we read.

My current solution is to have students bring a copy of the source to class, on the day we work on drafts, and then make them at least rework the information in their own words. But that hardly seems like the best solution.

* * *

But I have said enough about the particular parts of the assignment. These can be added to or subtracted from; they can be re-arranged or given a new emphasis. They can be adapted to different genres and different grade levels. It is not the parts but some basic principles that I want to dwell on here.

First, I'd like to suggest that we think again about the purpose of having students write about literature. If, as I believe, it is to help them become better readers, then we are best off when the writing is closely connected to the act of reading. A thesis-support paper might encourage good reading habits in many ways, but it always does so <u>after the fact.</u> For example, a student must have done a fairly close reading of the text to do a character analysis. But I would prefer an assignment in which students read and re-read as they write. That's hard to do with novels, except in journal form, but it's very possible with stories, poems and other short pieces. The idea is to capitalize on the interactive nature of reading and writing,

to allow the writing activities to feed back into the act of reading.

Second, I'd like to see us back off a bit from analysis and argument, giving more attention to description in literature assignments. The fact is that writing in which you prove something about a text is very difficult to do well. Just look at the scholarly journals if you doubt that. And so with many expository and persuasive assignments, we assume far too much--that, for example, students have read carefully in the first place, or that they have a thesis that they really care about. There is something artificial about many of these papers: only English majors really care about the points they are making; the other students are just going through the motions.

On the other, description of how they read has an intrinsic purpose and is within their reach. Relieved of the burden of proving something, students can be honest in their response to the work of literature. And this, I can see, is why their journals have always been so much more readable than their more traditional papers. In a journal, as a paper of many parts, a student can express feelings and values, can describe the work and what it was like to read it, can admit to mistakes, can speculate about other meanings. That seems much more productive than trying to convince the teacher that a poem "means" this or that.

Finally, I'd like to suggest that we place less value on tight organization and a single focus when we ask

students to do something with a work of literature. Consult, for a moment, your own experience. Have you ever felt, as I have, that your nice neat essay on "The Red Wheelbarrow" or "A Rose for Emily" somehow belied the messy richness of the actual reading experience? The problem is not that the writer has to leave things out--that goes without saying in any kind of writing. There is a more basic problem: tight construction around a single thesis removes us several steps from the reading experience itself.

Reading, as Rosenblat reminds us, is a complex and messy activity: "difficult and tricky and sometimes frustrating, but always exciting and challenging." In our real experience of literary works, we encounter ambiguities, we experience ambivalence, we deal with apparent or real contradictions, we back track and jump ahead. And reading changes with circumstance. If the writer has re-read, and I think that is a condition of good writing about literature, the experience keeps changing, becoming richer and more complex with each encounter. This is the way reading is--and it is all to the good.

Out of that messy experience the writer must find something to say. It might be a coherent "reading" of the text--but it might not, and the experience is no less valuable for that. In short, I believe that we should acknowledge and even value the problems students have in reading and the changes that take place as they read. This is not to encourage sloppy reading. It is rather a way of

getting students to understand what they do when they read. And it argues for a looser form, which reflects the nature of the reading experience itself.

In the end, however, I wind up asking myself some basic questions. Has this sort of assignment helped my students become better readers? I think the answer is yes. Have they enjoyed the writing and have they understood why they were doing it? Here the responses of students are somewhat mixed, but generally positive. And finally, the ultimate test. Have I enjoyed reading these papers and have I learned something in the process? The answer is yes. And isn't it true that this is the ultimate pay-off: to get a set of papers that you actually look forawrd to reading?

THE PAPER OF MANY PARTS: SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT ("INTRO TO POETRY")

". . . I should like to see our classrooms more often places in which we have the courage to admit to our students that the actual business of recreating the work is difficult and tricky and sometimes frustrating, but always exciting and challenging." - Louise Rosenblatt, "A Performing Art" (1966)

This is a paper in six parts. They are: (1) an initial response to the poem you have chosen (after a few readings); (2) a prose paraphrase of the poem; (3) a brief report on something related to the poem (its subject, a reference within it, the circumstances under which it was written); (4) a parody of the poem; (5) an interview with someone outside this class who has read the poem; (6) a final response in which you extend the initial response in some way.

CHOICE OF POEM. You may choose any poem in The Norton Introduction to Poetry, except one that has already been assigned or one that will be assigned (see schedule). That leaves a lot to choose from. You must have made your choice in about a week.

LENGTH. The opening section should be 1-2 pages long; the paraphrase and parody will be short, about the length of the poem itself; the other sections--report, interview and concluding response--should also be 1-2 pages long. This makes a paper of 7-8 pages on average. Please start each section on a new page. As a "title page," simply put your name and then copy out the text of the poem itself. (You'll find this is a useful exercise.) Drafts can be hand-written; the final version must be typed, double spaced.

THE SECTIONS. (1) The intial response should be an extended version of the kind of responses we have written in class. Remember, however, that more sections will follow, so it might help to focus on a question or problem you encounter while reading the poem. You can revise this section, especially to clean up the style and mechanics, but try to remain true to your early response to the poem. (2) The paraphrase is a prose version of the poem in your own words. Try to keep the meaning, as you understand it, and change the language. Of course the meaning will change, but that's what you are supposed to notice. (3) The report is open. Normally you will have to go to the library, consulting reference sources and books in the stacks. Consider writing on the subject of the poem (alcoholic families, for example, for the Sharon Olds poem we have read), a reference within a poem (the Roman forum in the cummings poem), or the circumstances under which the poem was written (the death of the poet's father in reference to "Do Not Go Gently"). Whatever you use, make a copy and bring it to class on the workshop date. (4) The parody should be fun. Stick to the form of the poem as closely as possible and change the meaning in some way. Do not be afraid to poke fun at the poem; if it's a good poem, it can withstand your ridicule. (5) For the interview you will need to convince soemone to read the poem and then talk about it. Think of several people in case your first interview turns out to be a bust (it's a bust when the person has nothing to say aobut the poem). Write up the interview as a brief account of the conversation, including a few direct quotes. Do not include everything in question/answer style. (6) In your concluding response, be sure you just don't re-state the beginning, though you might wish to return to a problem or question you stated at the start. Consider what you have learned about the poem or about your reading habits from this experience. It's up to you. Just remember that this section should extend your discussion of the poem and not just repeat things you have already said.

DRAFTS. In about three weeks we will devote a class period to a workshop on drafts. For that period you must have a draft of at least three sections of the paper. One of these sections must be the report; bring a copy of your source material to class. Be prepared to read aloud.

The choice of poem is obviously important, so do some reading around in the book. You might want to look at another poem by an author we have read so far, or you might want to find a poem on a particualr topic. Perhaps you already have a favorite poem, but remember: your job is to read and re-read, to think and discuss, and perhaps to change your mind. Maybe your favorite poem is not the best choice. Just be sure there is something you might say about the poem; if it's too simple, you could have trouble. If you have trouble deciding, come see me and I'll try to help.

Date by which you should have chosen the poem:
Date by which you bring a draft of at least three sections:
Date the final version is due:

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"The Charge of the Shopping Spree"

1

Half a block, half a block
Half a block onward
All in the valley of Malls
Drove the two women.
"Forward with Credit Cards!
Charge to the hilt!" they said.
Into the valley of Malls
Drove the two women.

2

"Forward with Credit Cards!"
Was there a store dismayed?
Not though the women knew
Their accounts overdue.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to shop or die.
Into the valley of Malls
Drove the two women.

3

Stores to right of them,
Stores to left of them,
Stores in front of them
Open and waiting;
Stormed at by bargains and sales,
Eager, they flushed and paled,
Into the jaws of Credit,
Into the mouth of Hell
Drove the two women.

4

Flashed all their Credit Cards bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Buying all the dresses there,
Charging everything, while
Their husbands waited.
Plunged in the register smoke
Even though both were broke;
Calvin and Mackie
Fell with the Credit stroke
Rumpled and wrinkled.
Then they started back, but not,
Not with their Credit.

5

Stores to right of them,
Stores to left of them,
Stores behind them
Empty and closing;
Feeling like they'd been in hell,
While their Credit ratings fell.
They that had bought so well
Came through the jaws of Credit,
Back from the mouth of hell,
All that was left to them,
Was less than six hundred.

6

When will their glory fade?
O the wild charges they made!
While their husbands waited.
Honor the charges they made?
Only when they've been paid.
Foolish Credit shoppers!

--Cindy Ingelin

I met a traveling salesman from the old turf,
Who said--"Through vast and ceaseless cities I've roamed,
Stood in desert and dreamt of surf.
I saw the grave of another selling man by trade,
Whose life was lived so proud; he lived his
Life by some old scriptic passage he'd read
Which of life had said that appearance was grand,
And for his epitaph, these words appeared:
'My name is Willy Loman, man of men,
Look on my works, Charley, and despair!'
Now nothing remains...save Biff
And Happy, and Linda, who cannot cry."

--Mark Johnston

I met a traveler from the great Southwest
Who said - "A hamburger stand and Esso Station
stand in the desert...near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a tattered remnant lies, whose size,
and faded color, and stench of rotted jute,
Tell that its collector knew it not at all
that which survives, tied together the pieces
the hand that trapped them, and the heart that fed;
And on a plank, these words appear:
"The largest ball of string, collected by Malone
Look at the ball, Oh Guinness, and compare!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
of that colossal wreck, cracked and weedy
The lone and level road stretches far away.

--Judy Gram

I met a woman in an antique shop,
Who said - "Two oval and beautiful lockets
Lie on the counter . . . Near them on the shelf,
A delicate jewelry box sits, whose music,
And graceful charm, and lid of angelic life
Tell that the bureau on which it resided
In the past, was protective of the graceful vitality,
Of the hand that caressed it, and the heart that loved;
And on the inside of the lid, these words appear:
My dearest Elisabeth, love of my life,
Look to the music, as a guide, and listen!
Music of love. Close the lid
Of this angelic life, empty and silent
The faint sound in the distance flutters away.

--Shanda Lund